

[Mary Jane Brown]

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[md;]

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MARY JANE BROWN

[md;]

"Come up an' set a spell, ma'am. Hits right warm here in this sunny corner of ther porch. See this purty pitcher? Hits a birthday card from my preacher. Yes'm, today's my birthday. I'm forty eight years old. Oh, I know I look a heap older'n that, but hit's hard work and bad health as done it.

"My Pop was a share cropper all his life. He never owned nothin', not even a mule. There was twelve of us chillun an' we come along so fast that Pop an' Mom couldn't do no more than feed us. They done ther best they could, I reckon but we sure had a hard time.

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"Ther older kids never had no schoolin' a-tall. Ther youngest ones went ter school a little 'cause sometimes ther truant officer got atter Pop. But we moved so often that hit was hard ter keep up with us an' nary o' o' us went beyond ther third grade.

"I was ther youngest o' ther chillun an' by the time I come along things was mighty bad at home. Mom's health was poor an' seemed ter grow worse every time another baby come. I had ter go out an' work in ther field 'fore I was big enough ter go ter school. I never did have no pretty clo's nor nothin'. I went barefoot 'til I was so big I was shamed. As fast as ther other kids growed up they lit out. Some got married an' some jest wandered off, but there never was none at home big enough ter be real holp to Pop. Maybe that's one reason why he never done 2 no better at farmin'.

"Finally there was nobody left with ther old folks but me an' my oldest sister, Elizabeth. Liz worked in ther field most o' ther time but I was always kinda poorly so they kep' me in ther house ter holp Mom. When I was twenty thirty years old she had a stroke. Hit was a long time 'fore she could get erbout an' she wa'n't never much good again.

"That same year a neighbor boy began ter beau me aroun' a little. He'd walk home from church with me an' take me ter icecream suppers. There wasn't much for young folks ter do in them days. There wa'n't never a room fitten ter have company in nary one o' our houses. Tenant houses ain't much, you know. Jim was a steady chap an' helped his Pop at home. They was buyin' ther own place an' hit was a right good farm, too, but Jim didn't have no money o' his own. I didn't have none either an' I couldn't leave home ter earn none on account o' Ma bein' so ailin' all ther time.

"Jim an' me went steady together erbout five years. We wa'n't what you'd call engaged but I always jest reckoned we'd marry some day, when we could. That summer I begun ter feel kinda poorly an' one hot day I fainted clean away while I was doin' ther washin'. I most fell in ther wash tub an' scairt Mom awful bad. She couldn't get me up so she hollered for Liz and Pop. We never called no doctor when sickness come cause we never had no money,

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but there was a neighbor-woman who knowed jest as much as most doctors. Liz walked two miles ter get her an' when they come back Pop had me lyin' on ther bed in ther bed in ther front room, with a cold cloth on my head an' Ma was fannin' me with 3 her old palm-leaf fan she carried to church.

“Mis Christian (she was the neighbor) , talked to me an' felt o' me an' then she called Mom an' Pop into ther kitchen an' shet ther door. In a few minutes they come back an' Mom was cryin' an' Pop looked real stern. He come to ther bed an' said, ‘Mary Jane, whose ter blame? Was hit Jim?’ Then I knowed they'd found out I was goin' ter have a kid. I begun ter cry an, Pop said ‘Hit ain't no use cryin' now. You're ther onliest one o' all my chillun that's disgraced us like this. I'm a poor man but I always held my head up. Jim's got ter do ther right thing!’

“That night when Jim come over Pop told me ter stay inside an' he went out on ther porch. Ther two o' 'em talked awhile an' Pop sounded awful angry. Purty soon I heard Jim go off an' Pop come in. 'He's went ter talk ter his Pa. I'll go over there , tomorry an' see what they aim ter do', he says.

“The next day Pop come in from ther fields early an' washed up an' went off walkin' to'ard Jim's place. We kep' his supper warm an' waited til long after dark. Finally Liz went ter bed but Mom an' me set by ther stove jest waitin'. I'd cried til I couldn't cry no more an' Mom jest acted dazed like.

“ ' Long erbout ten o'clock Pop come in. He was walkin' real slow an' looked all wore out. 'taint no use', he says. ‘Jim's Pa won't let him marry you. Say's he's got plans for Jim an' we aint ther kind o' folks he wants for in-laws. Say's he's got reason ter think Jim aint ther onliest boy that's been with you'. When Pop says that he got red in ther face an' come over to me wavin' his fist in ther air. ‘If I reckoned that was true I'd beat ther Devil outa you tho' I aint never raised my hand ter no 4 girl child!' he said.

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"I cried then an' said, 'I'll swear on a stack o' Bibles a mile high that Jim is ther onliest one. I done wrong but I aint a tramp an, no man can say I am an' tell ther truth!'

"Poor Mom dragged herself ontent her chair an' grabbed Pop's arm. 'The Lord will provide', she said. 'Mary Jane's still our girl an' we gotta stan' by her. Mebbe she aint so much ter blame. The poor kid aint never had nothin' but hard work an' hunger. If Jim's a real man he'll come ter her now. If he gives in ter his proud Pa when he knows he's guilty, he aint fitten ter be Mary Janes's man nohow.'

"Well, Jim did like his Pa told him. He never come ter see me no more an' I stayed so close ter home that I never met up with him. A year later he married a neighbor's daughter that had schoolin' an' a farm in her own name. Nobody seemed ter hold hit against him, neither.

"I dragged along, workin' ther best I could, an' waitin' my time. Pop got grayer an' stooped more but he was always real gentle ter me after that awful night. Mom never said much but she jest seemed ter fade away an' three months before my baby was due ter come, Mom died one night in her sleep.

"When we buried her in ther little country graveyard somethin' seemed ter die inside o' me. Pop never scolded an' Liz never said nothin' nohow but Mom had been ther one ter keep up my spirits. I couldn't think what hit would be like ter have a baby an' didn't feel no love for hit, jest shame an' sorrow, but Mom had sewed up some little clo's an, knit two pairs o' little socks an' she'd say, 'We must do ther best we can fer ther poor innocent lamb.'

5

"After Mon went I jest walked aroun' like in a dream. Pop an' Liz was out in ther fields all day an' I was alone in ther house. I done my chores an' cooked ther meals an' washed an' ironed, but half ther time I didn't know what I was doin'. One bitter cold night in Feb'rury I woke up in awful pain an' knew my time had come. I called Liz an' she called Pop ter

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go for ther neighbor woman. While he was gone Liz built up ther fire an' heated water an' warmed blankets. She was good as could be ter me but I wanted my Mom an' I jest rolled an' twisted an' cried, Mom, Mom, oh, I want my Mom'.

"My little girl come jest 'fore day-light. She was mighty little an' puny ter make so much trouble. Her skin was real white with ther blue veins showin' an' her eyes was big an' blue. I called her 'Hazel' cause hit was a pretty name an' she was sech a pretty baby.

"Pop's health got bad that winter an' Liz couldn't do ther farm work alone. We didn't own no stock nor tools so we couldn't rent a good place, jest had ter take what nobody else wanted. We didn't have much furnishin's either , jest two beds, a stove an' table an' a couple o' chairs. Pop made ther baby a cradle out o' a old box but when hit was cold I kep' her in bed with Liz an' me.

"Sometimes Pop tended ther baby an' Liz an' me would go out ter work for some o' ther neighbors. He was gittin' real poorly an' I wa'n't well a-tall. Liz was jest like a old mule, ploddin' along, workin' hard, never sayin' much. Ther onliest time she smiled was when she petted Hazel. When ther baby was three my stomach trouble got worse an' I couldn't work. Pop got sick too so we had ter move over ter his brother's farm. I helped some in ther house an' Liz worked outside. In five months Pop died. His last words was 'I'm goin' ter meet my Judge. Your Mom's waitin' for me. Take good keer 6 o' little Hazel'.

"He didn't leave us nothin' an' we didn't know where ter go. Me an' Liz didn't have no schoolin' an' couldn't read nor write so we could only wash or scrub or hoe in the fields. Uncle rented a small shack near his house an' put us in hit. Liz holped on ther farm an' he gave us wood an' a little milk fer ther baby. I tended a little garden an' we managed ter live but two years later I got bad sick an' had ter have a operation. Ther county paid my expenses an' doctor bill an' Liz looked after Hazel.

"When I got better I tried ter get some work but ther depression come an' ever every farmer's wife was doin' all her own work. Then ther relief offices opened an' I got work

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in ther sewin' room. Hit wasn't much money but hit was steady an' we had enough ter eat. Then I got sick agin an' had another operation. When I come home I was poorly an' couldn't do much work even if I could find hit. I don't know how we pulled through. Liz picked up odd jobs an' Uncle holped all he could with milk an' meat an' garden stuff.

"Hazel didn't go ter school til she was near seven, 'cause she was so little an' puny an' there wasn't no one ter take her ter ther school bus. She seemed smart an' was promoted all right when she did go but she was always sickly. Sometimes I'd wonder if Jim could see how pretty an' sweet she was, might be he'd want ter holp her some but he never took no notice an' I reckon aint never even knowed her if he saw her face ter face. Her second year in school ther teacher sent her home an' said her tonsils was bad, reg'lar poison factories, an' I must have 'em took out 'fore she could come back ter school. I didn't have no money so I jest kep' her home ther rest o' ther year. I was still gittin' work at ther relief sewing rooms but that winter they closed. We sure had a hard time then. Liz was twenty years older'n 7 me an' gittin' too old ter work much. I couldn't seem ter git work 'cep' a day here an' there. Then I got sick again an' went ter ther hospital. This time they took out all my innards an' I was a long time gittin' well.

"Hazel went back ter school. She felt some better an' made good records. When I got well I went ter work on W.P.A. Uncle bought our little shack an' gave us ther deed ter hit an' five acres o' land. I reckon he musta felt he was goin' soon cause he sickened an' died three months later. We sure are grateful ter him 'cause hit means a home for Liz an' Hazel an' me. Taint much an' ther house needs a new roof but we can have a garden an' nobody cain't put us off ther place. Hit's ther onliest time in all our lives that Liz an' me has ever owned anythin' o' our very own an' hits ther onliest place we ever called 'Home'. Maybe some day we can make out ter buy a cow an' a pig or some chickens.

"I been laid off agin but I git some odd jobs an' now Liz draws her old-age pension. Taint much but hit buys food. Hazel is 13 now an' real pretty an' smart but kinda puny. I reckon she aint really ever had enough ter eat, such as milk an' meat an' eggs. I useta think

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maybe I'd marry some one that'd be a good Pa ter her an' give her a chanct but nobody seemed ter want me. O' course plenty men'ud hang aroun' fer no good but hit wa'n't what I holped hoped fer.

"I aint complainin' an' [?] I don't blame nobody but myself for my fix but hit don't seem like I ever had much chanct. Every penny me an' Liz can save we put by fer books or clo's fer Hazel. We both done willed our home ter her an'we aim ter give her all ther schoolin' we kin. Maybe she'll have a chanct ter be 8 somethin' an' marry a good, steady man someday. I sure do hope he ain't no tenant farmer 'cause Hazel aint cut out fer that hard kinda life. She's more like her Pa's folks."